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ABSTRACT

Seven methods for helping students find theme topics are presented in this document. The methods include the following: setting up a library browsing table of records, books, and criticism related to the work of literature that is being studied; permitting students to choose topics based on observation of the surrounding community or reactions to the mass media; providing a browsing hour in the college library or in a classroom filled with tape players, films, radios, books, and record players; and having students respond to a mock argument or develop free associations based on vague auditory or visual stimuli. (CC)

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Seven Methods for Helping College Freshmen to Find Theme Topics

This paper suggests seven methods of helping students to discover topics for themes. Without some guidance on topic selection, many students spend more time than they can afford on deciding what to write about. Because I like as much variety as possible in topics for student writing, I am happy that the seven methods described below allow for maximum variety. The first five of these seven take special precautions to help the student to build background on the topic that he chooses. Who among us has not made the mistake of expecting students to write themes on topics about which they knew so little as to have nothing to say? Also, provisions for background building on a topic allow the student to learn about things that he never would have thought about had the background not been explored.

These seven methods use, first, a library browsing table; second, student observation; third, mass media; fourth, a free library browsing hour; fifth, a free classroom browsing hour; sixth, a mock argument; and, seventh, an ambiguous stimulus, either auditory or visual. These seven methods give the student as much as a week or as little as a few minutes to select and narrow a theme topic.

The first method, the browsing table of literature related to one assigned short piece of literature, gives the student a week for the selection of a topic. My students have been very well pleased with this method of topic selection.

When I am teaching literature in freshman English and I have an author coming up, with Hemingway's "Hills Like

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White Elephants" or O'Henry's "A Municipal Report" or whatever, I set up a handsome display of materials on a table reserved for this purpose in the college library. The students are to go to this table and pull from it whatever they want. These are materials on regular loan, not on reserve. I stipulate that they will sample something from the table, and that they will include it in some way in the theme on the one work assigned to the whole class.

The first consideration in setting up the table is appearance. Attractive posters, beautifully illustrated books, or colorful album covers related to the author, his period, his settings, his works, or his characters are included. A bust of the author is a choice inclusion. Recordings of the author's works, or copies of his works, or criticism--- they are all there. In short, I use whatever is related to the author or to his works that I think might attract the attention of a student. As much variety is provided as is possible.

There is no stipulation that a student has to browse for any set length of time, or that he has to read any set number of pages or listen to any set number of recordings. People take whatever they want. After a week or two of work from the table, they are assigned one selection from the text for the whole class. Usually, the assigned work is a short short story. Because more than a few of my students are either poor readers or somewhat less than fascinated with literature, I would not assign a sixty-page story from the text and expect the students to read from the browsing table while planning a theme. I would rather

be honest with myself and read themes by students who have read the works they are writing about.

On the day that the assigned piece of literature is discussed in class, the themes on it are taken up, at the end of the period. This practice is to prevent the themes from parroting comments made in class about the selection. The long period of preparation for the themes, along with the related experiences from the browsing table, make for lively discussion about the assigned work. In one class, there will be comparisons of the assigned work to others by the same author, biographical explanations of the assigned story, critical commentary, social and historical insights into the story, and, of course, personal insights into the selection. All of these ways of approaching the selection are presented by the students.

Another pleasing result of the browsing table is that it introduces students to literature that they would never otherwise know exists. Several students have browsed in novels and decided to read them out of interest. Though this does not happen often, when it does, it gives the student material for well-informed writing about the author.

The second and third methods give the student a week or two to choose a topic from either the surroundings of the college or the mass media. The area around the college, including the community, and the mass media are popular with students because they are current and a part of the students' daily lives.

The themes on topics found by the student's observation of the surroundings take two or three weeks to prepare.

A week after the search for topics is assigned, I take a very few minutes to hear in class what the topics are under consideration. I then give them feedback, directions on how to proceed, on other things to look for, on community resources, on library holdings, on related materials, on people to consult. For example, if someone says that he is interested in the crooked telephone poles out by the football field, I suggest that he go to the telephone company to get some expert information on the causes of crookedness in telephone poles. This feedback and direction on the topics a week or two before themes are due helps the student to develop background information to use in his theme. The broad topics result from the student simply looking around him, and the resources for topics from this are limitless.

The third method, the use of the mass media, is much like the method on the surroundings. It, too, gives the student a week for the selection of a topic. With it, too, I give feedback and direction, with suggestions on other things to consider, other places to look, other people to talk to, things to read, to watch, to think about. I emphasize that the topics are to be selected with care to avoid themes that give only re-runs or paraphrases of selected passages. The themes on the mass media are to be reactions to or criticisms of the media. For example, a topic might be the illogical problem solving on <u>That Girl</u>, or signs of emotional instability in Viva paper towel commercials, or ways of reaching the viewer's emotions on <u>The Waltons</u>. From my questions about and responses to the topics they suggest, their background building proceeds as far as they care to

take it in the week or two before the themes are due.

The fourth and fifth methods are closely related. Both provide time for browsing, but the fourth takes place in the college library, while the fifth takes place in the classroom.

The fourth method, arranging for browsing in the college library, gives the student a few days or a week for topic selection. To give the students ample time to browse through the library, I simply walk into the classroom and announce that we are going to the library to look around for the full period. Everyone is to stay for the full period and is to keep looking for the full period, with the purpose of finding a topic for the next theme. I ask that the students avoid materials with which they have such familiarity that it is unlikely they will be led to think about something they have not thought about before. The hour is to bring new adventures, not to re-read favorite passages. Finally, I tell them that I will take up topics at the opening of the next class meeting, for me to comment on and return to them in the next meeting following. During our hour in the library, we just look at whatever we wish and leave each other alone. At the end of the hour, we leave, some of us with materials checked out, and some of us without. Resulting topics can range from state-financed cathedral construction to rabies in wolves to anything at all.

Differing by place and by noise level is the fifth method, the hour of browsing in the classroom. For this sometimes distracting hour, I bring in a jumble of tape players, record players, filmstrips, movies, radios, books, magazines, and

assorted other materials. The results are conversation, reading, listening, and discovery. The advantage of this hour is that it allows us to make noise, to discuss, to argue, to use non-print media. This method, like the others, yields a wildly diverse crop of theme topics. Topics can come even from the experience of living through the hour. One example is "Conflicts Between the Verse of Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Dance Music of Lawrence Welk." I would advise using this method only once or twice during a semester, for some students find it too distracting.

The sixth and seventh methods are for quick selection of theme topics, and rely on felt response and free association rather than upon the building of background information. These methods are having the student respond to an argument and having him respond to vague stimuli, either auditory or visual.

The sixth method, the response to an argument, entails the use of creative dramatics by two or three students. I ask these students to report to my office five minutes before the next class meeting, without explaining to them why they are to come in. When they arrive, I tell them that they are to act out before the class an argument, making the argument as strong and as realistic as possible. I give each an index card telling him what point of view he is to assume, and who he is to pretend he is. For example, one card might tell the student that he is the father of a female college student who has just driven the family car into the side of a train, and that her boyfriend probably caused the wreck. Another card goes to the accident-prone girl, who feels that the accident was caused by a

mechanical failure in the car. A third card could go to the boyfriend, who feels that the wreck was probably his fault. Then, the mock argument takes place before the class. Topic selection is easy for these short, in-class themes.

Another quick method for topic selection, the seventh method, having the student respond to a vague stimulus, either auditory or visual, is for a theme to be written out of class. The classroom time is for the development of a topic, and may be either part of a period or a whole period. For a vague auditory stimulus, we could devise a variety of ways to prepare a cassette tape. One way would be to re-record a commercial recording of sound effects at altered speeds. Or, we could scrape, bump, and rumble out our own series of strange sounds onto the tape. For the vague visual stimulus, we could quickly prepare a stack of inkblots. Or, we could bring in an example or two of abstract art. During this time in the classroom, the student is to muse, take notes, reflect, and plan. This exercise will lead him to consider topics through free association that he never would otherwise think of for topics for writing.

These seven methods, the browsing table related to one work; the theme from observation; the theme from the mass media; the hour of browsing in the library; the hour of browsing in the classroom; the reaction to the mock argument; and the reaction to vague stimuli, either auditory or visual, will evoke theme topics of infinite variety. Whether a method allows a week or a few minutes for the selection of a topic, the results will be diverse and surprising.

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